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Friedrich Froebel: A Path Least Trodden

Abstract

Friedrich Froebel is well-known for the invention of kindergarten and the pioneering educational philosophy he developed in the 1800s, which respected children's self activity and women's capabilities for the role of teacher, while promoting play as the primary medium for learning. His radical ideas and principled approach to early childhood education and care have inspired generations of educators to hold true to creative progressive pedagogies and the integrity of early childhood in its own right. Illustrated by examples from Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand, a new era in Froebelian education is aligned with the concepts of revolutionary critical pedagogy [McLaren, P. (1999). *Schooling is a ritual performance: Toward a political economy of educational symbols*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Incorporated] and teacher activism [Sachs, J. (2003b). *Teacher activism and mobilising the profession*. Plenary address presented to the British Educational Research Association Conference. Heriot Watt University, 11–13 September 2003. https://researchgate.net/profile/Judyth_Sachs].

Key words

Froebel, Revolutionary, Critical, Pedagogies

Introduction

Friedrich Froebel's (1782-1852) radical educational work in 19th century Prussia was the subject of adulation and vilification and his legacies continue to attract diametrically opposed views. Despite acquiring the status of an 'historical hero' (Hultqvist, 2001, p.163) whose ideas have set roots and flourished throughout the world, in his native Prussia (now Germany) he was also viewed as an 'anti-hero' and 'persona no grata' (Baader 2009, p.197).

Readers approaching Froebel's extensive catalogue of educational philosophy encounter writing that has been described as 'obtuse [and] convoluted' (Walsh, Chung & Tufeci, 2001, p.95). Consequently, the 'formidable difficulties of presentation and meaning' can deter readers from studying his works in their entirety (Lilley, 1967, p.3). Yet his ideas persist and are repeatedly reinterpreted through the centuries and far beyond the original locale in (Christian) Western Europe, adapting to cultural beliefs (May 2017) and spiritual traditions in many countries (May, Navrotzski & Prochner 2017), including China, Japan, Turkey, Russia, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand, USA, South Africa and Brazil.

Froebelian scholars have noted that misinterpretation and fragmentation have plagued the memory and application of Froebel's educational principles; and partial understandings have led to criticisms, which frequently coalesce in support or rejection of central concepts of freedom in education (Liebschner, 2001) and governmentality in children's living and learning (Ailwood 2003; Smith, 2014).

During Froebel's lifetime, this 'destructive socialist revolutionary' had advocated out-of-home, kindergarten education for *all* young children (Richards-Wilson, 2016), which challenged maternalistic traditions that kept women and children in the home, and paternalistic philanthropy that funded compensatory education as a means of social control. Hailed as a pioneer of women's introduction to the teaching profession, Froebel has been simultaneously criticized for promoting the benefits of 'innate' maternal characteristics; a charge that has been refuted by Liebschner (2001) whose detailed analysis of Froebel's life and work demonstrates that Froebel recognized nurturing qualities in women *and* men. Bruce (2020, pp. 92-93) argues that,

Froebel was a man of his time and society... This does not mean that his overall philosophy is suspect. Indeed, he was a pioneer in the field of early childhood education. His thinking gave respect for the child, the education of women and support

for the idea of women working outside the home. He pioneered reflective practice, building a principled approach from this.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, feminist theorists have identified emancipatory agendas in the work of Froebel and his Froebelian followers (Allen, 1982; Bakker, 2013; Coady, 2107; Powell & Gooch, 2018); and educators are deriving inspiration for *constructive* revolutionary practices from Froebel's principles for early childhood education. These practices have ranged from advocacy to innovation and activism through various phases of Froebelian education. Fundamentally, educators have derived strength from Froebelian philosophy or traditions to hold 'the whole child' and family in mind while socio-political agendas for education and care have meandered across diverse ideological landscapes (McNair, 2020; 2019) including times when being Froebelian has been unfashionable or countercultural. It is important to acknowledge that not all Froebelians have been hailed as entirely altruistic in their transformative actions. Brehony (1987) has argued that some acted for their own material and reputational gain. But in this article, we are seeking to illustrate principled conviction as *modus operandi* for practice in two national contexts, Scotland and New Zealand, with reference to debates concerning Froebelian education and the rights of women and children; constructions of early childhood in written and experienced curricula; and the governance of children's learning.

Revolutionary educators

Bruce (in press) charts the history of Froebelian education and scholarship since Froebel's lifetime and notes that three distinct phases or characteristics emerge: stationary, evolutionary and revisionist. There is not space within this article to revisit these phases, but we refer to them because they show tussles within the field of Froebelian education, which demonstrate its maturity and endurance; and because, Bruce argues, we have entered a new phase in which Froebelianism is denoted by the prioritisation of practices that are situated within the

entire Froebelian framework. That is, principles and practices are part of a unified and inseparable whole. It is this unification, based on the moral imperative that underpins Froebel's philosophy, which gives rise to critical revolutionary praxis. Froebelians who are driven by the moral imperative to hold the whole child in mind cannot separate that child from their social context. Where neoliberal political landscapes and performative educational practices challenge this moral position, they are impelled to counter-action. Bruce (ibid, np) argues that 'there is a difference between the revolutionary discarding of traditional authority and engaging in thoughtful consideration of practices handed down and examining these so that practice changes because it needs to rather than because it must.' Emergent critical revolutionary Froebelians are finding ways to work with 'traditional authority' to effect changes in educational policy and in localized early childhood practice. Simultaneously, they challenge inequities and dualisms (such as child vs. mother; indigenous vs. naturalized child) and reconstruct early childhood through principled curricula and pedagogies. This groundswell of influence has been particularly notable in the contexts we profile in this article: Scotland and New Zealand. It is perhaps no coincidence that these two locations are at the vanguard of Froebel-inspired revolutionary praxis in early childhood education. Bethell and May (2020) have noted, early Froebelians made the voyage to New Zealand from Scotland when, 'Planned settlement of New Zealand began in 1840 in the aftermath of the Treaty of Waitangi signed by the British Crown with Māori tribes. In 1848 a Scottish settlement was established in the lower South Island and named Dunedin – being the Gaelic form of Edinburgh – to become the 'New Edinburgh' of the South.'

Froebel's childhood autobiography is often cited as a motive for his lifelong drive to create an interconnected and holistic educational philosophy. His mother had died when he was an infant and his early to middle childhood was reportedly a lonely and miserable time.

Froebel's quest for unity, which lies at the heart of his theoretical propositions and practical

gifts and occupations for education and learning, may have reflected the disconnections, unhappiness and social unrest that he would have experienced during his early life. He grew up and entered adulthood during a turbulent period in Western Europe. During the French Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s, Prussia declared that it would visit reprisals on French civilians if King Louis XVI suffered any harm; and in the first decade of the 19th century, Prussia declared war on France. In 1813, Froebel was a member of the Lützowsches Freikorps, which distinguished itself in the battles against the armies of Napoleon I. (Brügger, 2018).

Just as Froebel experienced turmoil in his life, we write this article at a time when millions of young children's educational experiences have been disrupted by Covid19. The global health emergency has accentuated systemic and structural inequalities in many societies, which are refracted through early childhood provision so that,

repairing this deeply fractured system requires the dismantling of the systems of oppression that have reinforced the disrespect and devaluation of the women (and men) who have *always* been essential workers. These issues reflect a lack of understanding and appreciation of care work – the often invisible emotional labor of women – particularly women of color. (Peters, Swadener & Bloch, 2020)

Simultaneously in the UK, young children have been discursively reframed as burdens and barriers to the productivity of their mothers and / or fathers as they self-isolate from the virus and 'home-school'.

This article explores some of these 21st century challenges facing the educators, young children and families who constitute early childhood communities, drawing inspiration from Froebel's philosophy and principles from the perspective of situated critical pedagogies. Hence, the project positions Froebelians as revolutionaries who are finding principled, creative solutions for educational resistance and reimaginings.

Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy

Theoretical Conceptualisations

By drawing on the scholarship of McLaren (1999; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001) this section provides liminal glimpses into Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy and its relationship to Froebel. Revolutionary critical pedagogy is relatively new, however McLaren (2005) provides a helpful definition:

Revolutionary critical pedagogy begins with a three-pronged approach. First [practitioners] engage in a pedagogy of demystification centering around a semiotics of recognition, where dominant sign systems are recognized and denaturalized, where common sense is historicized, and where signification is understood as a political practice that refracts rather than reflects reality... This is followed by a pedagogy of opposition, where [practitioners] engage in analysing various political systems, ideologies and histories, and eventually [practitioners] begin to develop their own positions. Inspired by a sense of ever-imminent hope, [practitioners] take up a pedagogy of revolution, where deliberative practices for transforming the social universe of capital are put into practice (McLaren, 2005, p.59).

Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy, therefore, suggests 'if change occurs it happens on the ground', believers in this pedagogy, challenge class, exclusivity and celebrate diversity (Sennett, 1999:148). To be 'revolutionary' an individual must overthrow an old regime and effect change in society (McLaren, 2005). Was Froebel a revolutionary? He was certainly a reform-minded pioneer, who embraced discussion with those who held pernicious, narrow views (Froebel, 1896). The position articulated by Brehony (2001) was that Froebel believed in liberation and emancipation, and that he was keen to build democratic dialogue between free and equal individuals. Froebel was, not interested in hierarchical differentiation, and therefore, was challenged by the ineluctable oppressive practices of the Prussian Government

who introduced regimes to regulate and normalize education, subsequently perpetuating relations of domination.

One of the most remarkable achievements in Froebel's life, and there were many, was the development of his community school in Keilhau (the institute). The institute provided a compelling example of how Froebel opposed the Prussian Government. It was at the institute where Froebel demonstrated his unique stamp on educational practices. His fecund, creative, lucid educational ideas were of a time when education was homogenized, circumscribed and standardized. In contrast, Froebel advocated for individuality and agency, backed by a struggle for democracy. Froebel encouraged the following ensemble of principles:

...that learning succeeds best when undertaken by a searching and self-active mind; that freedom from rote-learning opens up the door to understanding; that discipline is a non-issue in a well-conceived programme; that freedom for children to explore, choose and question, can result in responsible actions and is not in opposition to harmony; that all learning has to start where the learner is; that a sound knowledge of children is a pre-requisite for successful teaching (Liebschner, 1992, p.16).

The above principles provide insights into Froebel's conviction of liberatory philosophical educational practices, and offer potent critiques of education that controls and normalizes. It is, therefore, plausible to suggest that Froebel was a radical humanist with regard to his philosophical ideas and practices. It is equally possible to understand that Froebel was a critical educator, unorthodox in his thinking. Throughout his life, although with an awareness that he could not end oppressive practices by the Prussian Government, he remained audacious in his beliefs and practices and continued to oppose the Prussian Government with such perspicacity and fought until his dying day for children to have the freedom to learn, at their own pace, in their own way (Read, 2013).

It is argued that Froebel had a penchant for inspiring others to take up his philosophy (Brehony, 2001). Many years later we find his work spawned across early years pedagogical sites, global streets and cities across the world; as his ideas have been avidly and efficaciously taken up by Froebelians worldwide. Consequently his ideas are now quite commonplace in many early years environments (Read, 2013; Read, 2018; Valkanova & Brehony, 2006). Revolutionary critical pedagogy provides a theoretically salutary model for examining how Froebelians nurture and augment his philosophical ideas. For example, in the wake of Froebel, Froebelians have always found productive ways to push forward their work with young children.

Scottish Context

Over many years Scottish Froebelians have perpetuated and developed Froebel's ideas throughout their lives; deeply affected by his philosophy (Read, 2020). They have guarded Froebel's 'fiefdoms' against the invasion of unprincipled practice and eclecticism. We refrain from going in too much depth here as we do not, necessarily, intend to fortify the legacy of historical pioneers; rather our interest is simply to alert the reader to current Froebelian practitioners, who have 'reconnected' with Froebel's work and are, arguably, overwhelmingly regarded in Scotland today (Education Scotland, 2020; Bruce, 2020; Bruce, McNair & Whinnett, 2020). Froebelians have often found joy in the surprising transgressions that exist, combined with tussles between education as profoundly political and how inherent, hegemonic, political ideology impacts on children's educational experiences (Ross & Munn, 2008). However, it may be valuable to add here, 'reconnecting' Froebelians do not eliminate the authority of the policy makers, but they tamper with them a bit (Bruce, 2020). I believe it was Tina Bruce who once wrote: Froebelians are 'bi-lingual', i.e., they can express themselves both in political spheres as well as being able to articulate themselves from a Froebelian perspective, switching between the two fluently depending on

the context with whom they are conversing. However, it is worth bringing in the canonical work of Judyth Sachs here (2003a), this ‘bi-lingual’ position, is in contrast to what Sachs calls ‘creative compliance’, where well-meaning, progressive practitioners, may very well wish to be revolutionaries, overturning old regimes, however they can find themselves trapped in the ‘mental furniture of a bygone era’ (McLaren, 2010). It is in this bygone era where ideas and notions of past times continue to exist deep within the educational structures, and creative progressive pedagogical approaches can be stultified. This can result in progressive practitioners becoming compliant and subsequent products of a particular conjuncture. These aspirant intellectuals may very well be aware of the contradictions inherent in the educational system, where prevailing, deeply entangled, instructional practices exist, however they are unable to make much needed changes and end up falling back upon very old traditional approaches. There is no sense here of the practitioner wilfully ignoring educational approaches / directives, some, arguably many, that they may not necessarily agree with. While Sachs (2003b) appeals to the individual consciousness of practitioners to be reformists, she reminds us that practitioners exist in what she calls the ‘audit society’:

Under the structures of an audit society surveillance and inspection go hand in hand. Regulation, enforcement and sanctions are required to ensure its compliance. Of its professionals it requires self-ordering, not based on individual or moral judgment, but upon meeting externally applied edicts and commands. It requires “regulatory mechanisms” acting as “political technologies” (Shore & Wright, 2000:61) which seek to bring persons, organisations and objectives into alignment (Sachs, 2003b:7).

In this ‘audit society’ Sachs (2003b) highlights the political significance of the educational environment; where governments want control over a compliant profession and see that standards and regimes provide the regulatory framework to achieve this end. Here, Sachs vividly captures the dilemma of practitioners, i.e., the profound incompatibility between

creative progressive pedagogical approaches and the structurally inescapable rigid systems practitioners exist within. However, as said, the reform-minded, ‘bi-lingual’ Froebelian finds innovative ways to decode the obstacles and impediments in their path, contesting positions of creative compliance and overcoming inertia. With a certain measure of principled aplomb, Froebelians will often begin their journey by interpreting the curriculum through a Froebelian lens.

Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) (Scottish Executive, 2004) has been widely acknowledged as the most significant educational document in a generation, with the potential to transform learning and teaching in Scottish [early years environments] (Priestley & Humes, 2010). It is a creative, child-centred curriculum (Scottish Executive, 2004). The architects of the CfE organized its educational activity under four capacities, the successful learner, the confident individual, the responsible citizen and the effective contributor – which the Scottish Executive named as the ‘purposes of the curriculum’.

For each capacity the documentation specifies both the particular *qualities that characterise* the successful learner, the confident individual, the responsible citizen and the effective contributors *are able to do*. The capacities are thus presented as a combination of what the documentation is referred to as “attributes” and “capabilities” (Biesta & Priestley, 2013:35).

The four capacities intensifies notions of the child as a curious, competent, participant, and able being. The pedagogical approach is expected to be participatory rather than transmissive (Formosinho & Peters, 2019). Biesta (2020) explains that the Scottish approach is characterized by a focus on individuals and their capacities and by an emphasis on activity and community. Additionally, the CfE was designed to be viewed holistically, where the emphasis lies not so much with the segregation of subjects but with the integration, thus

making more sense to the learner (Froebel, 1896). Froebelians, therefore, have greatly supported the CfE.

However, CfE has attracted criticism for its imprecision, its ‘mix and match approach and seemingly atheoretical design’ (Priestley, 2012:178). Ross and Munn (2008) echo these sentiments further when they point out, that there is no doubt that the CfE debates have provoked a cleavage of opinion amongst scholarly commentators e.g., while some view the CfE as tantalizingly ambiguous, others note frustration at the vagueness of the document, this has led to countless disagreements, tensions and contradictions. One of the main accusations is that of conceptual encumbrance, i.e., that the CfE has simply reproduced the ideology of the previous curriculum, by emphasising certain subjects of the curriculum to the exclusion of others (Biesta & Priestley, 2013). For example, the National Improvement Priorities are characterized as literacy, numeracy and health and well-being (Scottish Government, 2019). As a consequence, scholarly commentators have relayed concern that the curriculum has not really changed, as focus dwells on the inordinate attention placed on the segregation of subjects and, preponderantly, on the testing and assessment of young children. Regrettably, there appears to be a distinct shift from a participatory curriculum to a transmissive pedagogical approach (Formisinho & Peters, 2019). For instance, didactic tick-box formal assessments are currently being implemented in Scottish early childhood education settings, almost in a state of ferment that show little signs of abating. This dominant discourse of standardisation and narrowing of early childhood education has been challenged by ‘reconnecting’ Froebelians (McNair, *et al*, forthcoming). Applying some of Moss’s (2013) concepts, the tick-box assessments currently being implemented are inextricably linked to a pedagogical approach that is underpinned by a desire to ‘tame’, ‘predict’, ‘prepare’, ‘supervize’ and ‘evaluate’ learning. This transmissive approach to the CfE has, ostensibly, done little to enhance the richness of CfE, and there are claims that the depth and breadth

have been diluted and trivialized (Biesta & Priestley, 2013). Froebelians resist the discourse of formalisation and standardisation, and challenge this somewhat puerile understanding of the child, which signifies empty conformity (Blaisdell, *et al.*, 2020, forthcoming). For example, a scholarly foray into a more Froebelian way to document children's learning was carried out by McNair and her colleagues, which captured children's learning in a way that was respectful to the individual child (McNair, *et al.*, forthcoming). Therefore, to reiterate, a Froebelian practitioner does not practice with complacent pedantry, nor do they eliminate the practice directives from the Scottish Government, but they realize the potential value in meddling with them a bit; practicing with Froebelian principles at the forefront of their practice. These kinds of political choices and ideological paths chosen by practitioners are the fundamental aspects of Froebelian pedagogy and practice.

It is important to add that Froebelian networks (mostly led by women) are gathering momentum in Scotland. From Dumfries and Galloway to the Highlands and Islands qualified Froebelian practitioners are sharing his rich legacy. There appears to be a distinct shift from individual practitioners, scattered throughout Scotland, who have an interest in Froebel, to a burgeoning Froebelian movement (Bruce, McNair & Whinnett, 2020). What has emerged from this movement is a depth of communal feeling, where individually trained practitioners have found value in articulating their views with like-minded practitioners from local networks; subsequently, local networks have connected with national networks who all unite to constitute and foster Froebelian ideology. Standing together, Froebelians have found strength in the basic ties of 'reconnecting' through shared practice, professional dialogue / complex articulations, authorship and, indeed, friendship (Bruce, 2020). It is no wonder, then, that Froebelian practice is stronger than ever in Scotland, which has been evidenced by regulator reports, which ultimately influence the shape of early years practice. Further, it is exhilarating to report that Froebelian principles have influenced the current national guidance

documentation *Realising the Ambition: Being Me* (Education Scotland, 2020). Every early years practitioner in Scotland is expected to be familiar with this document, which explicitly illuminates Froebel's inspirational principles.

Aotearoa New Zealand context

During the 19th and 20th centuries, teachers who had been influenced by Froebel, or trained in Froebel educational institutes in the UK arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand and began to establish kindergartens. Educational historian, Bethell (2016) indicates that their pioneering and revolutionary spirit was evident in Aotearoa New Zealand in the early 1900s. Dorothy Fitch and Winnifred Maitland were charged by their employer with modernising the curriculum for teacher education and Bethell notes that the challenges they encountered went beyond pedagogical conceptualisations to include social norms within a patriarchal society which disputed women's roles, capabilities and ideas as teachers; and architectural traditions for educational settings hindered the development of early childhood education promoting play and self-activity, which characterized Froebelian approaches to teaching and learning. As noted earlier, it is not our intention to provide an historical account of Froebelian education, which others have accomplished (for example Brehony, 2006; May, Navrotzki & Bethell, 2016; Palmer & Read, 2020; Wasmuth, 2020). But we offer a sense of the trajectories because 'historical perspectives can offer a valuable framework for interrogating current debates and...historical narratives might usefully inform policies and practices in twenty-first-century early childhood settings and contexts' (May & Navrotzki, 2016, p. iii) Looking back also enables the tracing of themes that have travelled through the centuries. May (2016, p.168) identifies four Froebelian metaphors within early childhood education, which have persisted since the first Froebelian emigres stepped foot on the soil of Aotearoa New Zealand in the late 1800s: '1. Constructing a new world 2. Planting the seeds of the new child 3. Handling the tools of technology 4. Expressing cultural identity'. These metaphors

not only have endured in kindergarten education, but also have been ‘hastened by the national curriculum, *Te Whāriki*’ and reframed by the bi-cultural language of this influential document (ibid, p.177).

Arguably, the writers of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) – including Froebelian Helen May - were some of the first revolutionary critical pedagogues in the new phase of Froebelian education who reconceptualized the kindergarten principles and practice in postcolonial terms. This reframing of curriculum more accurately reflects Froebel’s unity theory and his motive of culturally-sensitive education for each and all young children. Both begin with a perspective that attends positively to a baby or child’s embodiment of, connection to and active membership of their community’s assets, traditions and heritage. First published in 1996, *Te Whāriki* was revolutionary for its innovative, foundational principles of *Whakamana* Empowerment; *Kotahitanga* Holistic Development; *Whānau and Tangata* Family and Community; and *Ngā Hononga* Relationships, which foregrounded respect for babies’ and young children’s capabilities and their rights as participating citizens. Its authors (including Froebelian Helen May with Margaret Carr, Tamata Reedy and Tilly Reedy) viewed curriculum as an experiential process; learning as holistic interactions of children with their social, physical and metaphysical worlds (Soler & Miller, 2003); and formative assessment that would interpret ‘the lived social and cultural practices of the children’ (Carr, Mitchell & Rameka, 2015, p.452).

In the two and a half decades since its creation, *Te Whāriki* has withstood assaults from globalized neoliberal discourses that frame children in terms of narrowly proscribed, universal outcome measures; learning as a vehicle for advancement towards goals of economic productivity and competitive success; and early education as a panacea for the perceived risks that are attributed to multi-factor ‘disadvantages’ often associated with broad categorisations of socioeconomic status and ethnicity. It has also been noted that the social

constructivist perspective, which gave rise to the foundational principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*, opens up space for discussion about heteronormativity and other discriminatory practices (Zou, 2015).

Ardnt, Gibbons and Fitsimons (2015, p. 282) explain that in Aotearoa New Zealand,

The perceived need to ‘develop children’s potential’ even among families struggling to survive has become both distorted and affirmed through shifts in orientations towards children and their childhoods. *Te Whāriki* performs a kind of resistance to these shifts (Tesar, 2015) in its elevation of local and culturally important knowledges and in its refusal to prescribe universal techniques and strategies for all early childhood settings.

When calls to modify *Te Whāriki* endangered the integrity of its central principles, resistance has continued. The suggestion to change its internal, narrative assessment practices - which it was argued (Blaiklock, 2013) provided little evidence to enable the Education Review Office to know what children were learning (Alexander, 2016) - is one example of an assault on the philosophical framing of early childhood constructs and pedagogies for which *Te Whāriki* had become renowned. Another example of resistance to external assessment challenges was the refusal by Aotearoa New Zealand to sign up to the OECD’s pilot of a standardized, international assessment measure (see OECD, 2018). Significant campaigning, involving notable Froebelians (Helen May, Mathias Urban) highlighted the dissonance between *Te Whāriki*’s principles and the ‘IELS’ programme¹. The latter was said to be a threat to early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand because it represented a ‘one-world view’ of childhood, leading to follow-on interventions that would ‘encourage a pedagogy of compliance’ (Carr, Mitchell & Rameka, 2016, p.451); and would, ‘shift the emphasis away from pedagogies which focus on that which is meaningful and relevant in children’s lives and

¹ <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/early-learning-and-child-well-being-study/>

their learning, to an emphasis on achieving assessment results that fit a universal framework’ (Mackey, Hill & De Vocht, 2016, p. 448)

Te Whāriki’s theoretical underpinnings have been related to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model and sociocultural theories of learner identities (May and Carr, 2016), but also to Froebel’s philosophy. Meade, Fugle & McCaul (2018, p.131) argue that *Te Whāriki* has extended Froebel’s influence and they provide examples of early childhood education practices in a setting in Aotearoa New Zealand to illustrate how *Te Whāriki* chimes with Froebelian principles, including:

- The central importance of first hand experience which holds meaning for the child
- The way that nurturing family, parents, grandparents and practitioners guide children as they are introduced to new experiences whilst giving freedom of movement, encouraging thought and ideas to develop
- The connections and engagement with nature and care of it
- The need for adults to observe children and to act on their observations so that education begins where the learner is, rather than where they ought to be. This means that those working with children need to be highly trained.

Maintenance of a critical stance serves to challenge complacency when *Te Whāriki* and its enactment may risk acquiring reified status. Soler and Miller (2003, p. 64) acknowledge the tension of a sociocultural curriculum that tries to construct meaning on both national and locally situated levels. They argue that pedagogies must enable ‘the child’s active role in co-constructing and reconstructing personal meanings’. The modern Froebelian ‘tradition’ sees communities of innovation and resistance continuing to challenge universality, taken-for-granted assumptions and unequal power dynamics in early childhood policy and practice. These gatherings help to promote the professional criticality and advocacy roles that May

(2006) has encouraged in the light of international policy interest and investment in early learning.

The Currency of Revolutionary Critical Froebelian Pedagogies

Froebel moved through rough and hazardous socio-political terrain throughout his life. His unswerving **commitment**, to pursue, articulate and enact his educational theories and philosophy, display a lifelong dedication to principled early childhood education and care (ECEC) to which contemporary Froebelians devote their intellect, energy and passion. Principled approaches to curricula and pedagogies ensure **consistency** of positioning without compromising an ethos of respectful integration of the ‘small cultures’ (Holliday, 2016), which children, their families and communities offer to settings for ECEC. This perspective enables educators to co-construct socially responsible and culturally valid educational experiences with babies and young children, which prioritize their identities, talents and interests. When education is first and foremost for children, as it was in Froebel’s kindergarten - a garden *for* children – Froebelian principles demand political and cultural **contestation** when ‘regimes of truth’ lose sight of children’s humanity. This must begin with demystification of the dominant signs and symbols of educational discourses, accompanied by critical reflexivity. The intellectual and emotional **companionship**, which typifies national and international networks of Froebelian educators, has supported and nurtured such endeavours since Froebel pioneered reflective practice (Bruce, 2020). **Criticality** ensures that practice is simultaneously cognisant of Froebelian histories and vigilant against stultification that arises from wallowing in orthodoxy. To espouse and claim publicly that Froebelian principles orient pedagogies for ECEC does not always sit easily among globalising, neoliberal educational trends. To swim against the tide of educational doctrines that promote reductive and transmissive views of young children’s capabilities and signs of learning, demands the kind of **courage** that early Froebelian travellers have displayed and which

contemporary Froebelians marshal in their everyday work. Embracing a revolutionary critical perspective engenders both challenge and opportunity: for **creative** progressive pedagogical approaches in **collective**, hopeful resistance to discordant regulatory mechanisms of 21st century educational systems; and activism in response to inequitable social structures. The ‘utopian spirit’ (Allen, 2004) of the early Froebelian pioneers is replicated in Scotland and New Zealand. Within that utopian ideal, the roots of the principled approach to ECEC are unashamedly

‘valued for the important contributions they can make to the future, especially when thinking differently helps us see the past and present in a new light, enabling new connections to be made to experiences and traditions that we might not have seen before or previously saw in a different way. We can then rediscover the importance of historical or contemporary figures and movements to the alternative stories that contest the dominant stories that have overlooked or spurned such figures and movements.’

(Moss, 2014, p.8)

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